MMR_768 Lowell Didas

Lowell Didas
Earns Master Model Railroader® #768

As a youngster, my friends and I would spend Saturdays during the summer at our secret playground: the train yard in Camden, New Jersey. The yard had a coal tipple with huge coal piles off to the side. We would climb up to the platform and jump onto the side of the coal pile. Whoever could get the most covered in coal dust won (unless the guy working there didn't hose us off first). If we didn't get hosed off, we got broomed off by our moms, which usually didn't feel too good.

In 1954, my grandmother took my brother Jack and me to the theater to see the new Disney movie, "The Great Locomotive Chase," starring Fess Parker. My grandma was the cashier at the theater and thought we would like this movie because it had "old-time" trains. Well, we both enjoyed it. As we walked home, we had to cross over some train tracks, and the Flyer was fast approaching. Jack decided to go to the playground; I just stood at the crossing, waiting for the train to pass. Witnesses estimated the train was moving around 60 mph when I was sucked into it and thrown about 20 feet into the air. I was knocked out, had a broken collarbone and bruised hip, and spent nine days in the hospital. When my dad took me home, he told me he had started carving the engine from the movie. I was seven and told my mom that someday I wanted to see an engine like the one in the movie. And I did, 64 years later, when I saw "The General" in Kennesaw, Georgia, in 2018.

Dad finished his carving by Christmas the year I was injured. It turned out pretty cool, and I still have it. That same Christmas, Santa brought me a Lionel train set with the General, two yellow passenger cars, a circle of track, and a transformer. It was set up under our tree and got lots of run time. My cousin, Arthur, got a set of trains, too, but it was on a 4x8 sheet of plywood. He didn't like trains, so Dad bought them for me — the start of our railroad empire.

We had the trains in our storeroom until we moved from New Jersey to Southern California. I don't know what happened to the Lionel trains. I was 12 and involved with

Above: **Gordy Robinson, MMR® (left), presents Lowell Didas with his MMR® plaque. —** ***Gert "Speed" Muller photo***

Below: **Several Rocky Mountain Region and National members were present to celebrate Lowell's Master Model Railroader achievement. From left to right: Doug Baney, MMR® Gordy Robinson, Allen Carter, MMR® Lowell Didas, Larry Carter (RMR Director), Sue Didas, MMR® Kevin Anderson, Bekki Anderson, Cameron LaFleur, Bob Connolly, Martyn Jenkins (At-Large Worldwide Director), MMR® Jim Wanlass (Northern Utah Division Superintendent), and John Doehring (Eastern District Director). —** ***Gert "Speed" Muller photo***

the Boy Scouts in Long Beach. My friend Lee Cunningham and I frequently rode our bikes downtown to Ray's Hobby Shop. Lee had his trains in a little shed next to the garage. It had mountains, scenery, and lots of track and trains, all in HO.

By age 16, I had a 4x8 layout in our garage based on a plan from Linn Westcott's book, *101 Track Plans*. The layout took up all my free time. I was in high school, and my parents gave me a choice for Christmas 1964: trains or a new Honda motorcycle. Trains were fun, *but a motorcycle*... bye-bye trains! The motorcycle came with a condition: I had to enlist in the Navy Reserves.

After serving my country, I found a job at Douglas Aircraft Company in Torrance, California. I rode to Pasadena, California, and discovered trains again at the Original Whistle Stop, walking out with N-scale trains. I found another hobby shop near Knotts Berry Farm in Anaheim called the Little Depot. I practically lived at that store and made lifelong friends like Paul Scoles and Randy Lee. Paul and I built benchwork for the store layout. He taught me about trackwork and scenery. Paul converted me back to HO and HOn3. I still had the N-scale, so I built a 3x5-foot version of the Gorre & Daphetid. I finished the trackwork and wiring but got sidetracked to HO again. It was now 1982, and I moved my family to Utah.

Many things changed when we moved to Utah, the biggest of which was a new bride. Susan came with two boys, and she became involved in Cub Scouts for over 30 years. When we became empty-nesters, she moved her sewing empire from the basement to one of our two unoccupied bedrooms, and I started my biggest project ever: a 16x24-foot HOn3 layout.

When I got cancer (long story short, I beat it), model trains helped with my stress relief. Somewhere around 2014-15, I joined the NMRA. A couple of interesting things happened at my very first Northern Utah Division meeting. As I walked in, the first person I met was Geoffrey Carter, Division Membership Chair. As I signed in, he introduced himself and asked me to please watch the table and get everyone who came in to fill out a name tag and check the roll sheet. (That was fine; however, he didn't return for about three months!) When the meeting started, Janet Jennings asked me if I belonged to the NMRA, to which I replied that I did not. She handed me a form to fill out. It was a Rail Pass. I gave it back to her with a $20 bill. She returned my money and said she'd take care of it this time.

Geoff, who was a good friend by now, finally returned as the new train show chair. I was now officially the new membership chair — a railroad job if I ever saw one. Jack, the then-Division Superintendent, asked me to run for one of the open board positions. I said I didn't know many people. He said you'll get to know them better, get elected, and start opening up. So, I ran and got elected. Jack had a stroke and had to step down, moving Jim Wanlass, the then-Assistant Superintendent, to the Superintendent position, and I ended up being the new Assistant Super. That was five years or so ago. The Region needed a vice president (the current VP had just resigned). I was interested in the Secretary position but became the Vice President — railroaded again.

By now I had earned my first certificate, Volunteer. At our next Rocky Mountain Region board meeting in the spring of 2020, I was elected Region President. That term was the most fun and the world's fastest four years! A year later, I earned my Official certificate.

I resigned from my Division Assistant Super job to concentrate on my presidency and not take a chance on a possible conflict of interest. I did a few clinics in the Division, a couple at a Region convention, and at a national narrow-gauge convention. As Region President, I wrote a column for each quarterly newsletter. I also wrote an article for an annual. The next thing I knew, I'd earned the Author certificate. I had three certificates but no interest in pursuing my Master Model Railroader® — I thought it was out of my reach. I was content attending Division meetings or op sessions and drooling over someone else's layout.

Backtrack to 2018. I met (or rather crashed into with my walker) Randy Allio from Charleston, West Virginia, at the Minneapolis (Minnesota) National Narrow-Gauge Convention. He modeled in On30 dead rail, the scale I was building in our new home. Seven years later, we continue to talk once or twice a week with extended 2- to 3-weeklong visits two to three times a year. In November 2023, he told me he had just got his first three AP certificates and planned to earn his MMR® by June 2024. I said I had three certificates also. Is this a challenge? He said, I guess it is. All I could say was, challenge accepted!

I have a small problem; structures keep me distracted. I could be building another turnout and seeing a good project in the *Narrow Gauge & Short Line Gazette,* and off I go. My AP guru, MMR® Jim Wanlass, just finished concentrating on Kevin Anderson (who recently achieved MMR®). Jim had Bob Connelly come to my house and organize an attack plan to finish my remaining certificates. It was all about the paperwork. Getting the work done was relatively easy, but paperwork was tricky for me. Structures and Civil took a little time, but Electrical was a breeze. Three days before my term as Region President ended, I was informed I had earned my MMR®.

It's interesting to think that this journey would not have happened if I hadn't helped Geoff with his membership job. I have so many friends to thank. First, as my wonderful bride of 39 years to eternity, Susan, who inspired and sometimes tricked me into going to the basement, even brought meals downstairs so I wouldn't have to stop what I was working on. That's a big THANKS, Hon. My sons Jared, Bob, Curt, Lamar, and Larry, who have helped with construction for three layouts and are constantly pushing to get me to get back to work. I cannot forget my 6-year-old NMRA member and grandson, Ryker. He has been a member for two years and works on scenery on his N-scale layout.

My brother, Jack, was always there when I couldn't do it alone. Thanks go to Randy Allio, MMR® Bob Weinheimer, MMR® Jim Wanlass, Rick Luther, MMR® Martin Pirnat, MMR® Kevin Anderson, Bob Connolly, Geoffrey Carter, Dave Turner, Al Badham, and Janet Jennings, who started my official journey in the NMRA. In all, no one in the Northern Utah Division of the Rocky Mountain Region hasn't helped or inspired me in one way or another. From our construction crews to Pizza Box (adventures in plaster); from just calling someone on the phone to writing a profile for a Division member in our newsletter because we don't know him/her very well or they are new to the Division. It has all been fun for everyone, but especially for me.

Certificates Earned
Lowell Didas, MMR® #768

Association Volunteer
Association Official
Master Builder – Cars
Model Railroad Author
Master Builder – Structures
Model Railroad Engineer – Civil
Model Railroad Engineer – Electrical